

HALLECK, FITZ-GREENE

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Poets

71.2009.085.0517.



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# **Lincoln Poetry**

**Poets**

**Fitz-Greene Halleck**

**Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources**

**From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection**

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor.

Number 421

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

May 3, 1937

## LINCOLN'S ADMIRATION FOR HALLECK'S POEMS

Lincoln's love for the poets is well known and his ability to quote from many of them is a matter of record. It is interesting to note that before public opinion had placed a very high value on the work of Fitz-Greene Halleck, Lincoln had expressed his admiration for several of Halleck's lines. Less than three weeks before Lincoln's death, he was visited by James Grant Wilson and some friends. Mr. Wilson made this memorandum in his diary at that time: "The President at the White House read to three intimate friends with much power and pathos, Halleck's "Alnwick Castle" and "Marco Bozzaris."

James Grant Wilson was traveling abroad in the summer of 1856 and spent a day with Robert Burns' youngest sister, Isabella, who is said to have resembled the poet more than any other member of the family. She was over eighty years old and the last survivor of the Burnses. In talking about her brother she expressed the opinion that nothing had been written about him which was equal to the lines the poet Halleck had contributed.

In the month of April, 1860, Mr. Wilson was located in Chicago where he was publishing a literary journal called *The Record*. His office was in the Portland Block on Dearborn Street where Leonard Volk also had his studio on the sixth floor. One day Lincoln, who was then giving Volk some sittings, was met on the stairway by Wilson and invited to visit his office on his return from the studio.

Lincoln was very much interested in the busts of Shakespeare and Burns, which adorned Mr. Wilson's office and which he had brought from Stratford and Ayr. Mr. Lincoln was led to comment, "They are my two favorite authors, and I must manage to see their birthplaces some day, if I can contrive to cross the Atlantic." Shortly after this visit Mr. Wilson presented Abraham Lincoln with a copy of Halleck's poems and in the letter which accompanied the book, Wilson mentioned the fact that he had met Robert Burns' sister. Lincoln acknowledged the receipt of the book with the following letter:

Springfield, May 2, 1860

Mr. James G. Wilson.

My Dear Friend: I am greatly obliged for the volume of your friend Fitz-Greene Halleck's poems. Many a month has passed since I have met with anything more admirable than his beautiful lines on Burns. With Alnwick Castle, Marco Bozzaris, and Red Jacket, I am also much pleased.

It is wonderful that you should have seen and known a sister of Robert Burns. You must tell me something about her when we meet again.

Yours very truly,

A. Lincoln.

Lincoln, always a great admirer of Burns, thought Halleck's long tribute to him which contained thirty-eight stanzas a very beautiful poem. These two verses must have especially impressed him; and how much more they impress those who have stood at Lincoln's birthplace and the Lincoln National Memorial.

I've stood beside the cottage bed  
Where the Bard-peasant first drew breath;  
A straw-thatched roof above his head,  
A straw-wrought couch beneath.

• • • •  
And I have stood beside the pile,  
His monument—that tells to Heaven  
The homage of earth's proudest isle  
To that Bard-peasant given!

From "Alnwick Castle" the opening lines must have impressed Lincoln. His own people had always been a migratory family, living on the very frontiers of western civilization. Not so the royal family of Alnwick Castle:

Home of the Percy's high-born race,  
Home of their beautiful and brave,  
Alike their birth and burial place,  
Their cradle and their grave!

"Red Jacket," a poem eulogizing an Indian chief, "also a Monarch born," is far removed from the atmosphere of Alnwick Castle but was quite familiar to Lincoln. A single stanza in which the chief's eloquence is praised, may have indirectly influenced the writing of the Gettysburg Address when he told a friend that it was to be "short, short, short."

Is eloquence?—Her spell is thine that reaches  
The heart, and makes the wisest head its sport;  
And there's one rare, strange virtue in thy speeches,  
The secret of their mastery—they are short.

The closing lines of "Marco Bozzaris" must have impressed Lincoln deeply and they were prophetic of his own place in history.

And even she who gave thee birth,  
Will, by their pilgrim-circled hearth,  
Talk of thy doom without a sigh:  
For thou art Freedom's now, and Fame's;  
One of the few, the immortal names,  
That were not born to die.

# Guilford's Fitz-Greene Halleck: America's Forgotten "Byron"

by Ray Bendici, [www.connecticutmag.com](http://www.connecticutmag.com)

Sep 18, 2013



*Image from Wikimedia Commons*

The town of Guilford recently announced that it has launched [guilfordct375.org](http://guilfordct375.org), a website dedicated to the town's 375th anniversary, part of the year-long celebration. According to a press release, the site will also serve "to build community and support among the town's businesses, organizations, civic groups, 22,000+ residents, and neighboring communities." It will be "a one-stop resource for all-things past, present, and future about the Town of Guilford."

One of the former residents sure to receive some attention is poet Fitz-Greene Halleck, once hailed as "the American Byron." Although the Guilford native's name now may be described as "obscure," there was a time when Edgar Allan Poe (no stranger to verse himself) said of Halleck, "No name in the American poetical world is more firmly established than that of Fitz-Greene Halleck." He is the sole American writer memorialized in New York City's [Central Park's Literary Walk](#), joining only William Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns in the honor; Halleck's popularity was so enduring that when in 1877 (10 years after his death) the statue of his likeness was dedicated for the Walk, President Rutherford B. Hayes was on hand for the ceremony, along with a crowd of 10,000.

Today, it would be a challenge to find 10 people who had ever even heard of Fitz-Greene Halleck.

Born on July 8, 1790, to Israel and Mary Halleck, Fitz-Greene was a bright child who eagerly consumed knowledge, at one point bragging that he had read "every book" available in Guilford's public library. He started composing poems around the age of 11, and in 1810, had his first works published in a New York newspaper called *The Columbian*. A year later he moved to New York City, where he found work in finance and was exposed to a more cosmopolitan culture than his simple hometown could offer, including opportunities to connect with other creative individuals.

He soon met Joseph Rodman Drake, a physician and aspiring poet, and over the next few years, the two formed a strong partnership that eventually led to the publication of the *Croaker Papers* in 1819. The collaborative effort yielded 35 satirical poems that appeared in the *New York Evening Post* and the *National Advertiser*, becoming a popular sensation thanks to their light and playful jibes at the topics of the day.

The success of the *Croaker Papers* helped Halleck's career and reputation as a poet really take off, as many appreciated his style and willingness to challenge societal beliefs. He soon found himself a member of the prestigious *Knickerbocker Group* that included literary notables James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving

and William Cullen Bryant. From various accounts, Halleck was charming, quick-witted and sociable, and was very active in the burgeoning American literary scene.

In September 1820, his good friend Drake succumbed to tuberculosis, a passing that devasted Halleck and inspired him to write one of his better-known verses, "*On the Death of Joseph Rodman Drake*." Its expression of grief over the loss was especially notable for the opening stanza.

*Green be the turf above thee,  
Friend of my better days!  
None knew thee but to love thee,  
Nor named thee but to praise.*

Many of Halleck's biographers have suggested that the poet was homosexual, and deeply in love with Drake. Although there is no direct evidence of a romance—not that there would be, given the public attitudes of the age—Halleck lamented having been forced to participate in Drake's wedding, suggesting that he was "committing a crime" knowing Drake's true feelings. Biographer Charles Hemstreet wrote: "[Halleck's] Muse was sorely wounded when Drake died, and the fuller poetic life that might have been his was buried on the green slope of the Bronx with his friend." In 1903, *The New York Times* reported that Drake's body was to be exhumed and re-buried next to Halleck's, in accordance to Halleck's will, although the request was never carried out.

Halleck never married, and in fact, created a few works that were critical of marriage and many others that had strong homosexual themes. In American Byron: Homosexuality & The Fall Of Fitz-Greene Halleck, John W.M. Hallock (a distant relative) presents a detailed study of "America's first homosexual poet," and Halleck's influence in that role. Many believe that the first homosexual novel published in the United States, Joseph and His Friend, written by Bayard Taylor in 1870, was a fictionalized account of Halleck's and Drake's relationship.

During his prominent career, Halleck wrote a number of well-received poems; among his best-known works are "Alnwick Castle," "Fanny," and "Marco Bozaris." His works were read by everyone from common men to presidents—Abraham Lincoln was said to have often read his works at The White House. Halleck even met with Charles Dickens when Dickens famously visited America in the latter half of the 19th century.

Although his notoriety came as a poet and he gained celebrity because of it, Halleck did not rely on his composition of verse for income. Instead, he worked in finance, eventually taking a position as the private secretary of business magnate and millionaire John Jacob Astor in 1932. He served in that well-paying capacity until Astor's death in 1948. During that time, he continued to publish poems, although he seemed to be more interested in New York's social scene, and created only a handful of new works.

Halleck retired to Guilford in 1849, where he quietly lived out his remaining days in a house he shared with his sister Marie. He died on November 19, 1867. His final words were reported to be, "Marie, hand me my pantaloons, if you please."

It's not quite clear how or why Halleck has faded from the public eye. It could be the quality of his work—Poe once described Halleck's poem "Fanny" as "endurable, but to the practiced versifier it is little less than torture." Halleck also went after "sacred institutions" of his day, so some of his work doesn't quite stand the test of time as well. Possibly, the homosexual overtones to Halleck and his life may have been a factor. Or it could be quite simply that the poetry-loving masses just preferred other works.

In 2006, a [Fitz-Greene Halleck Society](#) was formed to recognize Halleck's contributions. The group would meet every July 8 (Halleck's birthday) at his statue in Central Park, commemorating the poet by reading his works and spreading the word of his efforts.

Still, there are those in somewhat more recent times who know of Halleck. Here's an excerpt from *Highways & Byways of Connecticut*, a tome printed by G. Fox & Co. in 1947 to celebrate its 100th anniversary and the state's history, which includes vignettes waxing rhapsodic about every town in Connecticut. This is the entry for Guilford, which features its poetic son.

*Guilford—home of poetry and dreams, founded in 1639.*

*On seeing Guilford, I believe no one would express surprise to learn that here a famous poet lived. The very air is redolent with romantic reverie.*

*The old stone houses with their glimmering panes sleep in beds of flowers on verdant, downy swards.*

*In such a gentle place was born Fitz-Greene Halleck—a name of note—one of America's greatest men of letters.*

*In 1847, he strolled these peaceful lanes of this old shore, meditating, planning, to give beauty to the world.*

*Born of humble parents, the village schoolmistress and tailor, he sought for learning with such an avid bent that he soon, as a boy, had read every book in the library.*

*It's strange to think of—a dreaming young man spending his days in John Jacob Astor's Counting House. But that's what he did to earn his living and gather funds for high education. He went to New York and amassed his learning there, storing it up for when he could return to the more inspiring setting of Guilford by the sea.*

*This quiet, gentle man loved his state and wrote of Connecticut in his greatest work:*

*"And still her gray rocks tower above the sea  
That crouches at their feet, a conquered wave,  
'Tis a rough land of earth, and stone and tree  
Where breathes no castled lord or cabined slave  
Where thought, and tongues, and hands are bold and free,  
And friends will find a welcome, foes a grave;  
And where kneel, save when to Heaven they pray,  
Nor even then, unless in their own way."*

Green is the turf above Halleck, who is interred in Alderbrook Cemetery on Boston Street (Route 146) in Guilford. He waits quietly to be rediscovered by a new generation of poetry fans, who may help him rise once again in the world of letters.

<http://www.connecticutmag.com/Blog/History/September-2013/Guilfords-Fitz-Greene-Halleck-Americas-Forgotten-Byron>



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An early copy of the first edition, having the 'head and shoulder' portrait.
139. (GALSWORTHY). An Appreciation, Together with a Bibliography. By Joseph Conrad. Illus. 12mo, printed wrappers. London, 1926. First Edition with Bibliography. Fine. \$1.50
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152. HABBERTON, JOHN. Helen's Babies. 12mo, original cloth, (trifle



worn). Boston, Loring, (1876). Enclosed in half brown morocco slipcase, inner cloth wrappers. First Edition. Scarce. \$30.00

First Issue, having perfect type on page 13.  
Inserted is an Autographed Letter Signed by the Author, 4 pp., 8vo, July 23/01. To Arthur Stedman. In part: "Yours regarding Messrs. Lothrop Co's. suggestions regarding 'Claybanks' is at hand and I beg to say, regarding part of it, that I fully agree with the firm that 'CALEB WRIGHT' would be a better title for the book... 'Claybanks' would have been published before now had not my old friend, General McClurg . . ." etc.

153. HAGGARD, H. RIDER. Allan's Wife and Other Tales. 12mo, cloth. London, 1889. First Edition. \$3.00

154. HAGGARD. Eric Brighteyes. 12mo, cloth. London, 1891. First Edition. \$3.00

155. (HALE, E. E.). The Man Without a Country. In the Atlantic Monthly. Tall 8vo, original wrappers, (edges frayed). Boston, Dec., 1863. \$3.00  
First Appearance of this famous story.

#### HALLECK'S COPY

156. (HALLECK, FITZ-GREENE). Essays, Biographical and Critical. By H. T. Tuckerman. 8vo, cloth, (binding spotted). Boston, 1857. First Edition. \$5.00  
Pres. Copy to Fitz-Greene Halleck, from the Author, dated May 30th, 1857. Halleck's Signature pasted on fly-leaf.

157. (HALLECK). The Life and Letters of Fitz-Greene Halleck, by James Grant Wilson. Thick 12mo, cloth, uncut. N. Y., 1869. First Edition. Choice copy. \$3.50

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Kipling, Dowson, Geo. Moore, Dunsany, Lionel Johnson, Dreiser, and Walter Pater are among the Portraits.





